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Immediate Release

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Environment Department Settlement Will Protect Rio Grande, Lead to Major Improvements at Santa Teresa Wastewater Plant

(Santa Fe, NM) — The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) has entered into a settlement agreement with the City of Sunland Park to resolve alleged violations at the Santa Teresa Wastewater Treatment Plant located in Southern Dona Ana County. The Santa Teresa Plant is owned and operated by the City of Sunland Park.

As a part of the settlement, Sunland Park has agreed to continue to divert effluent from the Santa Teresa Plant to the Sunland Park Plant until repairs are completed. Repairs to the Santa Teresa Plant will include the relining of aeration basins and the installation of new floating aerators. The settlement also calls for certification that sewage sludge has been removed from the West Drain of the Rio Grande, and for the City to hire a second full-time certified wastewater treatment plant operator, as well as the implementation of a water conservation plan and designation of a water conservation specialist for the City.

“The river is literally the lifeblood of people throughout New Mexico’s Rio Grande Valley,” said NMED Secretary Ron Curry. “These improvements will help protect the water quality of the Southern Rio Grande and the health of local citizens.”

This agreement settles State Water Quality Act and regulation violations alleged in a compliance order issued to Sunland Park by NMED in December 2003 as well as several violations alleged in an amended compliance order issued in January 2004. Alleged violations included disposal of waste in a watercourse, failure to notify NMED of problems at the plant, failure to take appropriate corrective action, and failure to assign a single certified wastewater operator to supervise the facility. Due to these violations, excess solids and inadequately treated wastewater were allowed to enter the West Drain during November and December 2003.

Illegal discharge of inadequately treated wastewater is a risk to human health and the environment because it potentially exposes humans to disease carrying organisms and pathogens. It is also a threat to aquatic life.

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Under the agreement, Sunland Park is also required to submit monthly reports to NMED detailing the number of new connections and building permits issued in the past month, as well as documentation proving the Sunland Park Plant's ability to handle these additional flows. Sunland Park is also required to submit quarterly status reports to NMED on these upgrades.

For further information please contact Jon Goldstein, Communications Director, NMED at (505) 827-0314.

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